

Community policing: a skeptical view

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About two decades ago a few American police leaders caught the wave of community policing reform, and now just about everybody's going surfing. Early interest in this reform can be attributed to police anxieties about skyrocketing crime and urban violence, unmet rising expectations from the civil rights movement, and middle-class alienation from government authority (Fogelson 1977: ch. 11). Like a "perfect storm" these forces converged in the 1960s, stimulating intense criticism from blue ribbon commissions and a daily drumbeat of negative press for police. Calls for change were issued, some of them radical: community control of policing, deprofessionalization, and reassignment of some core police tasks to other government agencies and the private sector. Alarmed and intent on ending this crisis of legitimacy (LaFree 1998), progressive police and scholars began to experiment with ways to make American police both more effective and more democratic without losing many of the advances made in policing in the previous half century. The resulting "community policing" reforms were influenced by fashions in organization development intended to make them less bureaucratic, more responsive to the "customer," and more results-oriented (Mastrofski 1998; Mastrofski and Ritti 2000).

Unlike some reforms that narrow their focus over time, community policing has remained multifaceted and diverse. Some departments emphasize broken windows policing, others feature problem-oriented policing and still others stress policing that establishes stronger police–public partnerships (Mastrofski, Worden, and Snipes 1995: 540–541). Much of the reform literature suggests that all of these are desirable and compatible. Whether or not that is so, it is clear that different elements of community policing appeal to different audiences, and it has led to fruitless debates over what community policing "really" means. In fact, it is this ambiguity and flexibility that gives community policing its all-things-to-all-people character and has contributed to its political viability over two decades, embraced by public leaders across the political spectrum. However, this diversity makes it difficult to conduct a rigorous inquiry

into the merits of community policing, a finding noted by the panel on police policies and practices organized by the National Research Council to assess, among other things, this reform (Committee to Review Research 2004: 232–233). It concluded that community policing was simply too amorphous a concept to submit to empirical evaluation and recommended that researchers evaluate it by breaking it down into more specific components.

The editors of this volume seem to have taken the NRC panel's recommendation; they have organized chapters around a number of specific reforms that have in fact been widely construed as important elements of community policing: problem-oriented policing, broken windows policing, third-party policing, offender-focused policing, and hot spots policing. Therefore, I will limit my discussion of community policing to those efforts that seek to link the police more closely to the community in "partnership" arrangements: joint activities to coproduce services and desired outcomes, giving the community a greater say in what the police do, or simply engaging with each other to produce a greater sense of police–community compatibility.

I will fulfill my role as community policing critic by offering a skeptical view. The skeptic is a thoughtful doubter; doubting is a methodology, not a conclusion. To the extent that community policing is a good thing, it should withstand the careful scrutiny of thoughtful doubters. I will ask four questions about community policing in the United States. How has the community policing reform movement changed what the public expects of its police? How has the community policing movement changed the way that policing is organized and performed? How, if at all, has community policing produced beneficial public outcomes – less crime and disorder, more or better service, more social capital, and more equitable service delivery? What impact has community policing had on police legitimacy?

The public's expectations of the police

Reform movements are built on promises that may stimulate expectations not previously held widely. They can fuel change because "Nothing happens unless first a dream" (Sandburg 1970). Community policing begins with a distinct advantage, for its advocates promise to deliver what the public has long dreamed of but received only in middle-class suburbs: client-oriented, "service-style" policing (Wilson 1968). So it seems unlikely that community policing has changed what folks *want*, but it may well have altered that to which a good many feel *entitled*, especially those segments of society that were heretofore least likely to enjoy

it, the economically and socially disadvantaged. The majority of Americans are probably aware in a general way of community policing and its promises (Harris Poll 1999), but most probably cannot articulate the finer points of community policing programs. Nonetheless, it appeals to powerful political and cultural themes of our time that have to do with a blend of both communitarian and good-government ideals (Manning 1984; Crank 1994; Lyons 1999: 18–25).

There has been virtually no research on what citizens expect of their police that would enable us to draw conclusions about the impact of community policing. Here we must rely upon a bit of indirect evidence and a great deal of speculation. The promises of community policing reform have steadily rained down on the American public over the last decade, leaving us with a reasonable, if untested, assumption that they have had at least some impact. Community policing has been a significant presence in many local news outlets around the nation, and in virtually all of them the picture of community policing has been unremittingly positive (Mastrofski and Ritti 1999; Chermak and Weiss 2002). The most frequently mentioned theme in community policing stories is the police–community partnership dimension (Mastrofski and Ritti 1999), followed by bringing more resources to the local police, and producing tangible results. This provides some fuel for speculation about the “field of dreams” that community policing advocates are building in the minds of the American public. It has two basic elements: police responsiveness and results. Community policing promises greater police responsiveness that takes the form of accessibility, the police knowing and appreciating what citizens want, and better prospects in the competition for police services. Deeply embedded in responsiveness is also an expectation of civility and caring, concerns that were front and center in the legitimacy crisis of the 1960s (Reiss 1971). Under results I include safer, easier to live in communities and a stronger “community” through shared values and collective action. If asked to articulate what they expect from community policing, citizens would give these themes dominance. They have been nicely summarized as a yearning to “get back to Mayberry” (Lyons 1999: 163).

If the public has come to embrace community policing’s promises as entitlements, what does that mean for the future of community policing? Pre-existing expectations do significantly color how citizens evaluate the policing they receive (Reisig and Chandek 2001), but as Shakespeare noted, “Oft expectation fails and most oft there where most it promises.” Community policing reformers have encouraged the public to expect so much more, which makes it all the more imperative for police organizations to demonstrate results.

The organization and practice of policing

Community policing has been well marketed, but to what extent has it transformed the nature of policing in a nation where local influences predominate? I will consider three ways in which police organizations might be transformed: the adoption of new programs and altered structures, changes in the philosophy and culture of the rank-and-file, and changes in how the police practice their work at the street level.

Community policing programs and structures

We expect two kinds of programmatic and structural changes from community policing. First, it should broaden police organization goals because it should increase responsiveness to the much wider range of services citizens presumably want from their police compared to the much narrower confines imposed by the “professional” model. Second, it should alter the way police are organized to accomplish their goals.

If we were to measure changes in organization goals by observing police departments’ mission statements and strategic plans, we would undoubtedly conclude that community policing has had a major transformative effect. By 2000 more than 80 percent of large police departments and more than 60 percent of small ones reported that they had incorporated community policing values in their mission statements (Roth, Roehl, and Johnson 2004: 20). However, mission statements and plans by themselves tell us little about the goals that the organization really enacts. We learn more about the organization’s commitment to the community-oriented mission by examining such things as how the organization routinely evaluates itself, how it evaluates and rewards its officers, and how it prepares them to answer the demands of community policing. What little we know about the transformation of police organizations in these domains is not particularly encouraging. The vast majority of departments still expend most of their energies tracking traditional crime and enforcement statistics, rather than developing performance systems that track neighborhood quality of life and problem-solving (Weisel and Eck 1994: 66; Skogan and Hartnett 1997: 241; Greene 2004: 39). Perhaps most telling, recruit training has not been substantially revised to promote community policing.¹

Despite reformers’ admonition that community policing cannot be defined solely as a set of programs, program implementation has been a common strategy for accomplishing its goals. Neighborhood Watch, citizen police academies, citizen surveys, and the establishment of

community policing units are some examples of programs that are often appended to the existing organization (Roth *et al.* 2004: 8). In addition, a department may adopt certain structures thought to *facilitate* police–community partnerships, such as drawing beat boundaries to coincide with neighborhood boundaries, permanent assignment of officers to beats, and delegating decisionmaking to the lowest level to enable a more fine-tuned degree of responsiveness to community preferences and needs (Roth *et al.* 2004: 18–21). The adoption of such programs has been variable by type of program, but nonetheless widespread across the American landscape (Maguire and Mastrofski 2000; Roth, Ryan, Gaffigan *et al.* 2000; Maguire and Katz 2002). Most importantly, in a relatively short time the number of police agencies adopting such programs has grown significantly (Roth *et al.* 2004). However, these types of studies tend to indicate that the *partnership* aspects of community policing are the most weakly implemented (Maguire and Katz 2002; Maguire and King 2004; Roth *et al.* 2004).

The above evidence is based exclusively on police agency self-reports to the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and from mail surveys. Questions about the validity of such data naturally arise. The popularity of community policing creates a strong incentive to skew the department's self-presentation in favor of program adoption, especially since 1994, when large federal grants from COPS became available to departments willing to show a commitment to implementing community policing (Maguire 2002: 52–53; Maguire and Katz 2002: 513). And even if a program has been adopted, there is the question of “dosage,” how extensive and intensive the program is over time and space (Maguire and Mastrofski 2000; Roth *et al.* 2004: 4). These claims about community policing adoption, measured from a distance, through the eyes of interested parties, and without much precision or independent validation, should be interpreted as an indication of the *desirability* of community partnership programs and structures, or the desirability of the *appearance* of these programs.

We might have greater faith in indirect measures of structural change in police organizations, debureaucratizing changes thought instrumental to the accomplishment of community policing, but based on measures arguably less susceptible to the reactivity of the desirability of reform (Maguire 1997; Mastrofski 1998; Mastrofski and Ritti 2000; Greene 2004). The most comprehensive analysis found mixed results between 1987 and 1998 (Maguire, Shin, Zhao, and Hassell 2003). Large municipal police agencies moved significantly toward the community policing ideals of decentralization, lower administrative intensity, and greater civilianization. Some aspects of spatial differentiation did increase (more police stations and mini-stations), but the number of beats did not. On

the other hand, hierarchical flattening did not occur, nor did hierarchical segmentation, and vertical differentiation continued to increase. Police agencies also failed to become less formalized and less functionally differentiated. This hardly constitutes evidence of a revolution in the structure of policing.

A more valid approach to measuring community policing program implementation is on-site observation, but here we lack a sufficiently large, representative sample of organizations monitored over time. What we have instead are a small collection of in-depth case studies and cross-sectional comparisons of departments, most of which were selected because they were thought to exemplify good community policing implementation. Some of these have claimed successes in implementing community policing (Roth *et al.* 2000: ch. 7), but a substantial number have also documented failures and disappointments (Greene, Bergman, and McLaughlin 1994; Sadd and Grinc 1994; Tien and Rich 1994; Rosenbaum and Wilkinson 2004).

Skeptics should be prepared to accept that some departments have made changes in programs and structures, moving them closer to the ideals of community policing reformers. But there is reason to think that many, and probably most, American police departments fall far short of those few leaders. Some have understood this sort of phenomenon from the perspective of “institutional” organization theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). One version of this theory distinguishes early adopters of a reform from later adopters (Tolbert and Zucker 1983). Early adopters are driven to undertake new structures and programs to meet the demands of their technical environment (e.g., high or rising crime rates). These pioneers experiment and are willing to take risks by innovating to improve their technical performance in such domains as reducing crime and improving the quality of life. But for industries such as policing, that do not use validated technologies that are well proven to produce the desired results, the further diffusion of these innovations among the vast majority of police organizations depends primarily upon their becoming accepted as the “right” thing to do – entirely independent of the quantity and quality of empirical evidence on their ability to accomplish desired goals (Scott 1992). Once important leaders in policing begin to adopt community policing as the “right” way to do things, and once political leaders embrace it, rigorous scientific evidence regarding its performance becomes irrelevant as organizations scramble to adopt the programs and structures of the early adopters. This may account for the success of programs such as DARE, which flourished before any evidence was available on its ability to prevent illicit drug use and which continues to flourish in the face of evidence that it provides no prevention benefits (Rosenbaum and Hanson 1998; Gottfredson, Wilson,

and Najaka 2002). In fact, it accounts for the phenomenon that strikes some researchers as curious: that billions of dollars have been spent on community policing reforms and millions on research on community policing, but there is so little rigorous evidence on its effects on crime and disorder (Weisburd and Eck 2004).

Some researchers have applied institutional theory to policing (see Crank 2003 for a review), but there is relatively little evidence on the early-versus-late-adopter diffusion model. Ritti and Mastrofski (2002) found evidence consistent with that model in their examination of articles on community policing in professional police journals. Based on a nationally representative mail survey, Moon (2004) examined the extent to which community policing programs were adopted in the late 1990s, comparing the influence of technical and institutional pressures on early and late adopters. While not a complete confirmation of institutional theory's application to the diffusion of community policing, his research strongly supported the greater power of institutional over technical influences as the driving force behind community policing adoption at this stage.

Community policing philosophy and culture

"Community policing is a philosophy, not a program" (Roth *et al.* 2000: 183) is a popular phrase among academics and practitioners. From this I infer that community policing is implemented only when police officers in large numbers adopt an appropriate set of values; whether or not community policing has been externalized into programs and structures, it has not been implemented until police officers have internalized it. Depending on how one defines "philosophy," this can be a very low standard or a very high one. If a philosophy means what one thinks, feels, or avers (Sparrow, Moore, and Kennedy 1990: ch. 5), then the implementation standard is rather low. It is well established in social psychology and the study of police that values or philosophies measured in these ways are weak predictors of actual practice (Ajzen 1987; Worden 1989; Mastrofski and Parks 1990; Snipes and Mastrofski 1990; Terrill and Mastrofski 2004). Nonetheless, police attitudes about community policing in general, and specifically the partnership aspects of community policing are by some accounts overwhelmingly positive (e.g., Weisburd, Greenspan, Hamilton *et al.* 2001: 25–26). Such surveys ask officers to assess community policing principles in the abstract, but it is the particulars of officers' experiences in their departments that have the greatest meaning for how they act, and here the level of rank-and-file skepticism is much higher

(Sadd and Grinc 1994; Zhao, He, and Lovrich 1999; Schafer 2001: ch. 9; Rosenbaum and Wilkinson 2004).

If we take the philosophy-not-a-program (PNAP) perspective to mean that community policing must not only be embraced, but that it must guide practice, then we set a much higher standard. Some evidence suggests that officers who claim to embrace community policing values also behave differently from those who do not (Mastrofski *et al.* 1995; Mastrofski, Snipes, Parks, and Maxwell 2000; Terrill, Paoline, and Manning 2003), but we note that far more powerful are the structural and programmatic elements (e.g., whether the officer has been given a community policing assignment). On the whole, a pro-community policing attitude does not appear to be a powerful predictor of officer behavior.

“Probably the biggest obstacle facing anyone who would implement a new strategy of policing is the difficulty of changing the ongoing culture of policing” (Moore 1992: 150). A skeptic should wonder about the validity of this claim, a fellow traveler to PNAP, because it may have the causal mechanism of behavioral change backwards. It is like blaming the patient’s heart attack on his failing heart, rather than his diet, exercise, and genes. In the same way, changes in the occupational police culture may be less the *cause* of community policing practices than the *consequence* of structural changes, focusing on occupational culture as the change directs attention away from what might shape practice.

There is some evidence to suggest that a *monolithic* police subculture opposed to the principles of community policing may have never existed (Muir 1977; Worden 1995) and even if it once did, it is now splintered into many different subgroups with varying degrees of support and opposition to community policing (Cochran and Bromley 2003; Wood, Davis, and Rouse 2004). Over the last three decades hiring practices have changed, increasing the proportion of officers who are female, minority, and college educated (Committee to Review Research 2004: 79). These sorts of people may be more receptive to community policing (Weisburd *et al.* 2001: 31; Cochran and Bromley 2003: 102), but most research also shows that police socialization processes exert far more influence over officers’ behavior than hiring practices (Committee to Review Research 2004: ch. 4).

What are the structural determinants of police culture, and to what extent have they been transformed to produce the expected changes in police practice? The principal management tool for shaping police practices is training, and, unfortunately, we have little rigorous evidence on the impact of police training in general, much less that of community policing training (Committee to Review Research 2004: 141–147). Of the handful

of studies that look at the effects of training relevant to community policing, some indicate that it does yield more community policing practices and about an equal number indicate that it has no effect. Critics of the usual community policing training have argued that it wrong-headedly seeks to change officers' values and beliefs rather than giving them skills they can use to promote values they already possess (Buerger 1998; Haar 2001). Perhaps a more fundamental problem with community policing training is that many departments may use it as the sole or principal mode of changing police culture, and when its message is not reinforced by supervisors, managers, and policies that determine how performance is measured, monitored, and rewarded, there can be little hope that any fruit born of the training will but die on the vine. Indeed, police departments seem to invest more energy into converting the rank-and-file to a community policing philosophy than they do motivating supervisors and managers to promote community policing and giving them the skills and resources needed to do it. Large-scale studies are not available to document the scope of this problem, but this is a theme of case studies reporting disappointing results in the implementation of community policing (Schafer 2001; Rosenbaum and Wilkinson 2004). Even the experiences of Chicago suggest that getting the training right is no easy matter, and getting the hierarchy capable and on board is challenging too (Skogan and Hartnett 1997). Creating the proper structural environment for community policing is then no slam dunk, and there is good reason to suspect that large numbers of departments are not even getting close to the basket.

Police reformers have long emphasized the role of the top executive in shaping the culture and ultimately the practices of the police agency (Goldstein 1990; Sparrow *et al.* 1990; Moore and Stephens 1991). I have elsewhere expressed skepticism about the capacity of the police chief to transform the organization in this sort of way (Mastrofski 2002), but we lack objective and rigorous empirical tests of this proposition. We are not without autobiographical accounts of leadership success (Bratton 1998; Kerik 2001), albeit to create organizational cultures that tried to undo the brand of community-partnership policing that is the focus of this chapter, but these accounts are clearly not the product of disinterested, rigorous evaluation.

Community policing at the street level

The greatest discretion in the delivery of police services rests with the lowest-ranking officers, so the ultimate test of the reform's impact will be observed at the street level. This section is organized according to different types of practices that community policing, as construed in this

chapter, is supposed to promote. I consider whether officers who receive or show some form of community policing “dosage” (e.g., community policing specialist assignment, training, positive attitude toward community policing) to a greater extent than others engage in more of the desired practice.

Engaging the community. One of the great attractions of community policing is its promise to bring officers face-to-face with the public – to learn more about people and their problems, solve them, or at least comfort them when they cannot be solved. Permanent beat assignments, foot and bike patrol, mini-stations, and park-and-walk tactics are designed to increase “face time” between officers and their clientele. The philosophy of community policing highly values these interactions. Systematic observations of community policing present disappointing results. The data from a handful of departments suggest that the daily routine of both patrol generalists and specialists does not involve heavy engagement with the public, especially those in the neighborhoods to which officers are assigned.²

Many expect that community policing will produce a decline in the use of arrest and physical coercion. Some systematic field research shows that the style of community policing embraced by management may influence the use of verbal and physical coercion (Terrill and Mastrofski 2004: 127), and another study suggests that officers who embrace community policing make fewer arrests (Mastrofski *et al.* 1995: 552), but in the first case the researchers were unable to illuminate the mechanisms by which management achieved these results,³ and in the second they were unable to determine whether making fewer arrests was a good thing (Mastrofski 2004). A study of situations where officers were seeking citizen compliance showed that officers positively disposed to community policing were not statistically distinguishable from negatively disposed officers in their resort to coercion (Mastrofski, Snipes, and Supina 1996: 291). The limited evidence suggests that community policing has not had profound effects on the use of coercion.

Aside from improving the quantity and quality of police–citizen encounters on the street, many departments employ programs to increase police–citizen interaction in settings that focus on the discussion of priorities, exchanging information and ideas, and planning for joint citizen–police problem-solving ventures. Perhaps the most earnest and sustained effort of this sort, and certainly the most studied, is Chicago’s (Skogan, Steiner, Benitez *et al.* 2004). Chicago’s police-sponsored “beat meetings” offer neighborhood residents an opportunity to influence police priorities, participate in problem-solving, and evaluate and discuss the quality of police service in the neighborhood. Researchers report that the extent to which these things are achieved varies greatly, but that on the whole,

public involvement has improved over the last decade. Large numbers of residents show up, citizens actively discuss neighborhood problems, police provide information, solutions are proposed, and over time this has become as likely in disadvantaged neighborhoods as in those that are better off. By 2002 over half of the observed beat meetings involved equal police–citizen participation (Skogan *et al.* 2004: 19–23). However, despite intensive efforts, the meetings have had much less success in mobilizing citizens to engage in collective self-help behavior. It seems that large numbers of those who go to the trouble to participate tend to view the meetings as places to lobby for service delivery, not participate in its coproduction.

Seattle's neighborhood partnership efforts emerged from community groups organizing on their own to influence police and policing, but an in-depth study there yielded a less positive assessment than in Chicago (Lyons 1999). Despite some early advances in advancing democratic mechanisms for interaction, problem-solving, and accountability (both among different citizen groups and between citizens and local government), these were observed to atrophy, and instead Seattle's community groups served as a device to secure community conformance to police structures and priorities.

Providing services. Community policing advocates expect that officers will be more inclined to serve the public in ways that appeal to those who desire direct benefits. Community policing specialists do not appear to be more inclined than generalists to engage in such activities as: controlling problem citizens, being nice to citizens, spending time on citizens' problems (Mastrofski *et al.* 2000; Snipes 2002), or using an informal, order maintenance solution (Novak, Hartman, Holsinger, and Turner 1999). Some studies do show that training and officer attitudes are associated with an increased proclivity to deliver services, but even here the results are mixed (Committee to Review Research 2004: 142–145). Some (including a randomized experiment) show the expected relationship, but others (also including a randomized experiment) do not. One study found that officers having both training and a pro-community policing attitude were more inclined to grant citizens' requests to control people who were bothering them (Mastrofski *et al.* 2000), but another found that officers more positively oriented to community policing spent less time on their encounters with citizens (Snipes 2002). At best, the capacity of community policing to enhance service-style practices is contingent on currently unspecified conditions, making the prediction of improvements a river boat gamble.

Process-oriented policing. Many community policing reformers want officers to attend to the processes of police–citizen interaction so that citizens feel good about those interactions – regardless of what the police

do to or for the citizen. That is, the public should accept these actions as legitimate. Legitimacy requires officers to show respect to citizens, listen to their complaints and viewpoints, show concern for their well-being through inquiry and demonstrations of understanding, and demonstrate procedural fairness (Mastrofski 1999; Tyler 2004). While there is a growing body of evidence indicating that when police behave in these ways, police legitimacy is increased and concomitantly citizen compliance and law abidingness also increase (Sherman 1997b; Committee to Review Research 2004; Tyler 2004), there is very little evidence about the extent to which *community policing* efforts are responsible for officers engaging in these actions. Of the two studies testing this, one found that officers who regarded community policing positively were more likely to get citizens to comply with their requests to stop or avoid misbehavior, but this analysis also showed that pro-community policing officers were generally not more likely to resort to legitimacy-enhancing procedural methods (Mastrofski *et al.* 1996: 290; McCluskey, Mastrofski, and Parks 1999). The researchers hypothesized that officers who embraced community policing were perhaps more skilled at fitting the most effective compliance strategy to the particular circumstances. Another study of adherence to constitutional standards of search and seizure found that those officers who were most strongly committed to community policing were also those who committed the largest share of constitutional violations, perhaps because they were more committed to ridding the community of troublemakers than adhering to procedural requirements (Gould and Mastrofski 2004). Thus, we cannot say with any confidence that community policing has really contributed to a more procedurally sensitive style of policing in America.

The outcomes of policing

Reformers claim that community policing will lessen crime, disorder, and fear of crime. They also expect that it will render more and better service to the public and increase the social capital in our communities. Some expect that it will produce a more equitable distribution of services – giving more to those who have less. And, ultimately, community policing perhaps above all, is expected to produce more support for the public police, a greater degree of legitimacy. What does the evidence show?

Crime, disorder, and fear of crime

The National Academies have recently published a volume that includes a review of research on the impact of community policing. I draw liberally upon its findings here, and those of a somewhat modified version of

its report published by the two researchers who chaired this part of the National Academy of Science (NAS) review (Committee to Review Research 2004: ch. 6; Weisburd and Eck 2004). Both of these reports concluded that the available research shows that foot patrol, storefront offices, newsletters, and community meetings do not reduce crime, although some may influence perceptions of disorder, a pattern consistent with earlier reviews of the literature (Rosenbaum 1988; Sherman 1997b). Community policing programs designed to increase police–community interaction or make police more visible and accessible were found to reduce fear of crime and perceptions of disorder, but only one strategy, police officers making routine, door-to-door contact with residents, was shown to reduce crime. Finally, they noted a growing body of research that finds with consistency that when police undertake acts perceived as enhancing procedural fairness, citizens are more likely to comply with police requests and more likely to obey the law in the future (see McCluskey 2003; Tyler 2004).

The experts' review of community policing's effectiveness in reducing crime, fear, and disorder seem equivocal at best and pessimistic at worst. The National Academies committee concluded:

Some community policing strategies appear to reduce crime, disorder, or fear of crime. Many others have not been found to be effective when evaluated. (Committee to Review Research 2004: 246)

Nonetheless, the research available suggests that when the police partner more generally with the public, levels of citizen fear will decline. Moreover, when the police are able to gain wider legitimacy among citizens and offenders, nonexperimental evidence suggests that the likelihood of offending will be reduced. (Committee to Review Research 2004: 250–251)

Weisburd and Eck (2004: 59) were somewhat more cautious:

Yet in reviewing existing studies, we could find no consistent research agenda that would allow us to assess with strong confidence the effectiveness of community policing. Given the importance of community policing, we were surprised that more systematic study was not available.

The skeptic's perspective on this body of research subscribes to the following points. First, the claim that community policing at least reduces fear of crime and perceptions of disorder deserves closer scrutiny. Even the experimental evaluations failed to control for the possibility that reductions in people's cognitions of crime and victimization risk were due to a sort of Hawthorne effect. That is, it may be that what produced these results was the perception that citizens were receiving more or better attention; the control groups did not include programs that ensured

comparable levels of service of a different sort, nor did they attempt to create a comparable sense of “specialness” enjoyed by the community policing treatment groups.

Second, we should not place too much weight on the small number of studies that have shown that door-to-door home visits reduce crime. Even though these were based on experimental evaluations, the theory that links an infrequent home visit to neighborhood crime reduction requires considerable elaboration. How is it that so mild an intervention could yield a significant reduction in crime? Did this cause neighbors to mobilize more effectively to prevent crime, and if so, how does that square with so many other studies that show that such citizen mobilizations show no crime reduction effects? Did these visits render better information for police to identify and arrest criminals? To take preventive action?

Third, nearly *all* community partnership programs suffer from a similar set of theoretical and practical challenges that make success problematic. Their failure may be due to weak implementation, which I have already indicated is likely widespread (see also Rosenbaum 1988). But it seems just as likely that even where the programs have been thoroughly and vigorously implemented, success will be haphazard at best. Stronger police–community partnerships, at least as implemented, do not appear to add much to a community’s capacity to control crime and disorder. That is because police organizations (a) have not done much to develop better relations with those who have the best information about crime and disorder, and (b) police have not developed systems that can sift through and process information that will really help them develop effective strategies to reduce crime and disorder. There can be little doubt that effective policing depends upon a cooperative citizenry, but the value added by community policing programs, which focus on citizens predisposed to work with the police, has been marginal. Even special programs designed to make youths feel good about the police (DARE, police athletic leagues), in the hope that they will later provide useful information about crime and other community problems, are very weak interventions when compared with the day-to-day experiences those youths and their acquaintances have with the police. The public is more cooperative when they perceive the police to be considerate and fair (Tyler and Huo 2002), but this has not been a well-developed aspect of community policing programs (see next paragraph). Those most likely to have the best information about crime are the very ones who also report the worst experiences with the police. And it is not at all clear that police departments have figured out how to use effectively the information that does flow to them from the public. Crime analysis units still comprise a very small part of police departments, and recent reports about their limitations are not

very reassuring (O'Shea and Nicholls 2003), nor are reports that departmental communications about community-based problem solving are too poorly written to facilitate departmental monitoring (Skogan *et al.* 2004: 154).

Fourth, despite the undeniable appeal of a kinder, fairer police also being more effective in reducing crime, the relevance of these studies to community policing must be questioned. Community policing promises to deliver this style of policing, and the question for us is whether *community policing* interventions have done so and can therefore be linked to those desirable outcomes. As mentioned earlier, research has not linked community policing to this tendency to engage in procedural fairness. Further, we know nothing of the effects of community policing training and other strategies to promote this style of policing. The evidence suggests that when officers engage in procedural fairness, citizens are more compliant and law-abiding, but the real trick appears to be in finding ways to get officers to adopt those approaches, and here the very limited evidence available on community policing is not too promising.

Building social capital

Some research offers a beacon of hope to community policing advocates. Researchers are finding that collective efficacy (social cohesion among neighbors and a willingness to act toward the common good) is associated with lower levels of violence and disorder, and that this may be causal in nature (Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Reisig and Parks 2004). Neighborhoods are socially efficacious when members monitor the behavior of children, intervene to prevent socially disruptive practices (e.g., truancy, prostitution, drug dealing), and to secure resources from public and private institutions that can benefit the neighborhood. Through these mechanisms the neighborhood's capacity to prevent and react to threats to safety and order are enhanced. Although there is much still to be learned about the effects of social efficacy on crime and disorder, these findings are encouraging. The key question is whether community policing promotes social efficacy. Unfortunately, the answer seems to be that most community policing programs are not well suited to promote this purpose.

The most obvious problem with the popular community partnership programs is that they simply do not focus on developing the skills and habits among the public (or the police) that build collective efficacy. Neighborhood Watch does little to build social cohesion where it does not already exist. DARE tries to produce individuals with a drug-free

lifestyle, but does little to develop the civic virtues of persons engaged in collective enterprises for the common good. Citizen–police academies teach a great deal about how police organizations operate, but that seems useful mostly for getting citizens to fit in with the department’s organizational structures and routines, not for taking the initiative in one’s own neighborhood. The problem with most community policing partnership programs is that they focus too much on how to conform to police expectations rather than how members of the community can be given the will, skill, and resources to themselves engage in behaviors that contribute to less crime and a higher quality of life in the community. Whether the police are even the best instrument or should take the lead to promote collective efficacy is debatable. While the evidence on community-based efforts is not especially heartening (Sherman 1997a), there is some encouraging evidence about certain school-based programs (Gottfredson 1997). Wherever such efforts are sponsored, they are hard work, especially in those neighborhoods that are most disadvantaged, because the limitations of distrust, lack of resources, and inexperience in organizing present great challenges.

To be sure, some departments attempt to address the challenge of building collective efficacy by coming to grips with how to foster civic habits in citizens and sharing decisionmaking power in police. The best known of these is Chicago’s. But as already indicated, despite impressive levels of participation in beat meetings (following a “re-engineering” of the city’s original model), Chicago has not enjoyed much success in mobilizing residents to *act*, and the police department has a high turnover rate in officers attending the meetings, which undermines the establishment of stronger police–community relations (Skogan *et al.* 2004: 154). The picture of Chicago’s “district advisory committees,” operating at a more strategic level, is far less positive, lacking a clear purpose and getting more advice from police than they give to them. Thus, while Chicago’s community policing may have made significant advances in developing the bases for social capital, it has a long way to go.

More equitable distribution of policing’s benefits

Liberals are attracted to the prospect that community policing will deliver more good things to society’s have-nots. Even if community policing were not more effective, if it redistributed services more equitably, one could argue that it had produced a net good for society. However, community policing calls for an alteration in the mechanisms of service delivery, shifting from one that relies on reacting to individual calls for service, to one that reacts to priorities established by organized elements of the

community – neighborhood organizations, businesses, churches, victim groups, and the like. As previously noted, some research shows that when society's disadvantaged are well organized for collective action in these ways, greater benefits do come their way, but the problem remains: the disadvantaged are less likely to organize effectively for collective action (Skogan 1994: 179). The question then is whether community policing invests in society's have-nots a greater capacity to engage the police and lobby for the benefits they can bestow. If it does not, then by virtue of its distributional biases, giving more to those who can organize effectively, it may actually exacerbate service quantity and quality differentials between the haves and have-nots.

Skogan (2004; and Skogan *et al.* 2004: 26–37) provides the most focused research on this question, confirming that those most active in neighborhood beat meetings and district advisory committees in Chicago are indeed those who are better off, especially in Latino areas. In Chicago there is only a weak correspondence between what concerns the residential population of neighborhoods and those active in beat meetings, and activists tend to be more positive about the quality of police services (Skogan 2004: 65–67). However, there is some evidence that where neighborhood organizations work most energetically with the police, they will receive more service and that the city's response does tend to correspond to the priorities of both residents in general and especially activists. Yet this research does not provide a comparison of whether Chicago's reorganization of police service delivery to respond to neighborhood organization priorities works as well for the disadvantaged as it does for the advantaged, much less whether the disadvantaged are “gaining ground” compared to the more advantaged neighborhoods. Ultimately, we do not know whether Chicago's disadvantaged are better off under the community policing arrangements for mobilizing police responses than what preceded them.⁴

The research seems to tell us that where police-community partnerships flourish, there is a greater possibility of improving the quality of life, but that community policing's benefits will least likely be delivered to society's most afflicted. Researchers have not yet demonstrated that community policing helps them gain ground, but it does suggest that in a community policing environment, collective action is an important element for doing so. The challenge is in finding how to infuse the disadvantaged with the will and resources to organize effectively, and how to develop a community will to make the necessary investments to make that happen. If there is a magic wand to do this, community policing has not yet found how to activate its software.

The success story: nothing exceeds like success

When Americans want ever so badly to have a success, there are always many willing to seize upon an emblematic example, a “poster child” that inspires us to see what *can* be done, and from that infer that it *is* being done. Public officials, ever sensitive to the state of police legitimacy, surely welcome these success stories and understandably embrace them as good omens. Following in the wake of the crises of legitimacy that helped to ring down the curtain on the “professional” era of police reform, community policing success stories have proven to be a powerful force for sustaining the reform. They fuel the engines of “institutional isomorphism” in policing – as evidenced by the rapidity with which contemporary reforms are adopted. Obversely, skepticism is not all that palatable when people seek to nourish their hopes from such success stories. There are several such community policing success stories around the nation, and perhaps the most chronicled of these is Chicago’s. I will focus on it, because it has the added advantage of being the object of over a decade’s intense empirical evaluation.

The large body of studies published on Chicago’s community policing effort comes from a consortium of researchers led by Wesley Skogan. As he has written the companion chapter to mine in this volume, I will not offer a detailed review of this careful, impressive body of work, but from it I will draw my own conclusions. Does community policing in Chicago work? Not like a Swiss clock, but it is a worthy effort that seems to have rendered many significant improvements over what preceded it (Skogan *et al.* 2004). That seems to me cause for encouragement, but my skeptic responsibilities lead me to take a second lesson from the Chicago story, which is that effective implementation of community policing is not a walk in the park; it is hard work that requires identifying and correcting mistakes and a sustained commitment at many levels inside and outside the organization (DuBois and Hartnett 2002; Skogan *et al.* 2004). Repeatedly, Chicago’s evaluators note that there are many obstacles to full and effective implementation, they are not always overcome, and often the successes are mixed. Is this the model for the nation? I think not. Like running a sub-four-minute mile, we know it can be done, but we also know that few have the will and resources to do it. Early adopters may have that degree of commitment, but later adopters often rely upon the notoriety of the early adopters’ success, and fail to attend to the challenges that must be overcome to secure that success in their case (Tolbert and Zucker 1983; Ritti and Mastrofski 2002). In fact, it seems likely that most police departments and their communities are unwilling or unable

to make the sorts of commitments it takes to go beyond the fairly superficial transformations that come from adopting canned programs that are pale replicas of the “real deal.” Even as early as 1993, only half of the top executive respondents to a national survey indicated that community policing would require major changes in policies, goals, mission statements, and training, and only 27 percent indicated that it would require extensive reorganization (Wycoff 1994). Thus, it seems unlikely that large numbers were committed to the kind of effort that Chicago’s experience suggests is necessary to show substantial gains.

Enhanced police legitimacy

At first blush, the answer to the question, “Did community policing increase police legitimacy?” appears to be a no-brainer. Its rampant popularity among police agencies and elected officials, and the virtual absence of negative publicity point to a hearty, “Yes!” But if we apply the same standard of evidence to this issue as to others, the answer becomes less obvious.

We do not have anything resembling an experimental or quasi-experimental design by which we might judge the impact of the reform on legitimacy, so we need to rely on less rigorous methods. One approach is to measure legitimacy using public opinion surveys of the police. If community policing were enhancing police legitimacy, we should note that as its implementation increased in popularity over time, the public should render more positive views of the police, and we should expect to see a pronounced acceleration in positive evaluations in the years following 1994, when the availability of COPS funds added incentives for departments to implement or at least claim to implement community policing programs. National public opinion surveys offer no evidence of a nation-wide trend of this sort (Gallagher, Maguire, Mastrofski, and Reisig 2001). A variety of indicators (confidence, respect, satisfaction, fairness, honesty, brutality) suggest that during the era of community policing, the public’s evaluations of police have remained stable, fluctuated considerably according to no distinct pattern, or have declined. Cross-sectional comparisons of public opinion about departments that vary in their degree of community policing implementation or symbolic commitment to community policing could provide another indicator. Unfortunately, no such study has been conducted. A 1998 national survey of citizens’ satisfaction with the police serving their neighborhood compared twelve cities, finding that cities ranged from 78–97 percent reporting that they were satisfied. However, eight of the twelve varied little, only 84–89 percent.

Among those cities at the high and low levels of satisfaction there were no obvious patterns related to community policing.

An alternative view is that American police do not need to heighten the public's support beyond normal levels but are keen to ensure that it is sustained at an *acceptable* level, one that provides a stable environment in which organizations can operate without the need for radical change. In this regard, the above survey evidence suggests that community policing may have served admirably, because support for the police as an American institution has remained remarkably stable over the last two decades. This argument is subsumed under the claim that community policing is but the most recent manifestation of a long series of reforms designed to sustain the legitimacy of police (militarization, legalization, and professionalization), all circumlocutions that conceal or palliate the coercive nature of police work about which society is so ambivalent (Bittner 1970; Klockars 1988).

The two legs on which the legitimacy of community policing stands are responsiveness to the public and delivering results, and in both cases American society has not demanded rigorous scientific evidence to find value in this reform. While strong and consistent scientific evidence of its performance has not been available, the reform has prospered, at least if one judges by the eagerness with which communities around the nation have signed up for COPS grants (Maguire and Mastrofski 2000; Roth *et al.* 2000; Worrall and Zhao 2003), police leaders have employed its rhetoric and adopted its programs. Indeed, the very adoption of community policing programs seems to have provided a sufficiently strong signal to community leaders and the public at large that their police are doing the "right" thing (Committee to Review Research 2004: 308–12), and in this sense, community policing must be considered successful. This state of affairs is predicted by institutional organization theory (Scott 1992), and is likely to remain that way unless a different environment for legitimacy evolves, such as the "evidence-based" policing environment advocated by Sherman (1998).

The future of community policing: terrorist-oriented policing

Despite the contribution that community policing has made to the legitimacy of the American police, it is on hard times. The COPS Office, financial engine of the American reform movement, has had its budget slashed, and it is struggling to remain viable by demonstrating the utility of community policing to what one police chief recently called

“terrorist-oriented policing” (Kerlikowske 2004). Meanwhile, the Department of Homeland Security is distributing billions of dollars to state and local police agencies to join the federal government in the war against terror. Here community policing demonstrates its worth to the extent that it encourages citizens to be forthcoming with information useful to counterterrorist measures. This conjures up the vision of an eager public of amateur informants, voluntarily feeding information to the police, who carefully sift through it to guide their efforts to undermine terrorist threats.

The skeptic understandably wonders how realistic this terrorist-oriented, community policing vision is. Neighborhood Watch and similar crime prevention efforts have failed to demonstrate substantial benefits in reducing “regular” crime, so these canned, off-the shelf approaches seem even less likely to be effective in developing reliable sources on terrorism in those neighborhoods where the most valuable information may reside – immigrant communities, and especially, Islamic-American communities (Lyons 2002). Here the challenges for eliciting voluntary terrorist-oriented information are great. To the extent that local police respond to the federal government’s desire to be an intelligence conduit, how are local police to distinguish themselves from the federal enforcement practices that make immigrant and Islamic citizens and residents so fearful (dragnets, interrogations, secret trials and incarcerations, and deportation of undocumented aliens)? And how are local police to manage the tension between placating the fears of a public that supports profiling Islamic persons for terrorism, while demonstrating to those targeted groups an equitable sensitivity to the civil rights of all citizens (Davies 2002)?

Community policing advocates are rushing to assure Congress that community policing is essential to the success of this effort. Some have argued that this form of intelligence brokering has long been the hallmark of community policing (Ericson and Haggerty 1997), but the enlistment of community policing in the domestic war against terror marks a distinct change in the bases for justifying the reform. This transformation further subordinates the community to the police in this partnership, relegating police responsiveness and accountability to the public to the hinterlands of the police mission. The partnerships that matter most to police under terrorist-oriented policing are those that promote the more efficient exchange of information with federal law enforcement, intelligence, and various disaster response agencies at all levels of government (Committee to Review Research 2004: 209–214). And many are concerned that the terrorist-oriented mission and close association with military and intelligence agencies will accelerate the militarization and isolation

of state and local police forces, rather than bringing them closer to the police-community partnerships that served as the source of legitimacy for community policing in the past. Can this be the end of community policing? To the extent that the war against terror shapes community policing, it will end it as we have known it.

Most troubling in the way that community policing is being bent to federal priorities in the war against terror is the limited role envisioned for the community – primarily one of serving the state as its eyes and ears. Virtually absent from the discussion is the great need for community-based self-help responses to disaster, especially when state responses fall short, as they most assuredly will (Clarke 2003). The current obsession with establishing government command and control overplays the state's capacity to do all that must be done, and it overlooks the potential of citizen grassroots organizations both to reduce vulnerability and to respond to crisis. I would prefer to see more emphasis on a form of community policing that sought a role for the government in strengthening the capacity of citizens to engage in collectively efficacious action in crisis conditions.

Conclusion

Community policing's advocates have promised a great deal, and they may have thereby contributed to a rising sense of entitlement to better service. But after a few decades of reform, those looking for evidence of a "quiet revolution," a "new blue line," or a "paradigm shift," should be disappointed by the state of affairs. The quantity and quality of the evidence is itself disappointing, but considering that which is available, the skeptic must conclude that the glass of community policing's benefits is closer to empty than full. Its implementation has not transformed the structure and operations of American policing so much as it has altered its rhetoric. While there may be a few community policing exemplars among the nation's police departments, there is little in the national policing landscape to assure us that structures and practices have been strikingly altered. The evidence of its effectiveness resides primarily in its capacity to make the public less fearful of crime, while doing little to reduce crime itself. While collective action promises to provide real benefits to the nation's neighborhoods and communities, community policing advocates are still struggling to find the elixir that will transform quiescent and alienated citizens into virtuous civic actors. While perhaps shifting the bases of police and government resource mobilization toward those who engage in collective action, community policing has not necessarily been effective in spreading these benefits to those who need them most,

society's disadvantaged. Its capacity to serve effectively as a bulwark in the defense of the homeland against terrorism remains at present only wishful thinking.

To say that community policing's performance has been disappointing does not lead to the conclusion that it was the wrong path, but it is one that has for many meandered into a stagnant swamp of tepid programs and amorphous "philosophies," too often run by and for the police more than the community. Its greatest weakness, to adapt Gertrude Stein's famous line, is that there is often so very little there. Most police departments treat it as an add-on rather than something that requires a radical transformation of how the police and public organize to do policing. Such a transformation would require that the police first engage a community that can serve as an effective partner, and once that is accomplished, the police will inevitably require sharing far more power with the community than they have thus far been willing to do – the political equivalent of the loving, but oft-contentious partnerships portrayed in film by Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn. This is risk-taking of a major sort, because our police have long struggled, often with good reason, to build effective buffers from community pressure (Reiss 1992), and it is not at all clear that enough citizens are willing to commit the necessary degree of effort, especially in the most afflicted areas. These partnerships, even those most earnestly pursued, have been constructed, often with the acquiescence of citizens, to prevent truly potent political organizing to evolve (Skogan 2004: 59). A cynic might even suggest that this is their intended purpose. Whether that is so, or not, they represent a bland version of the ideals of a democratically invigorated policing in America. Without a piquant dish of community policing, we lack a true test of its potential to flavor our communities with beneficial outcomes. American police and their communities would be better served spending less time celebrating community policing and more time figuring out how to do it in a meaningful way.

NOTES

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1. Respondents to a 1999 national survey of municipal police agencies of ten or more full-time officers showed that 29 percent provided their recruits with sixteen or more hours of training on community policing concepts and principles, while 54 percent provided that much training on traffic accident investigation, and 67 percent provided that much training in physical tactics and martial arts. Only 59 percent provided any training on organizing community groups, and the vast majority of these provided less than eight hours of such

- training. These figures have not been published heretofore. They are taken from "Community Policing in America: National Survey of Police Executives and Agencies," which is described in Mastrofski, Parks, and Wilson (2003).
2. The Project on Policing Neighborhoods found that general patrol officers spent only about a quarter of their time in face-to-face public encounters and community policing specialists spent less than 20 percent (Parks, Mastrofski, DeJong, and Gray 1999: 499–500; see also Mastrofski, Parks, Reiss *et al.*, 1998). On average, patrol generalists spent less than a handful of minutes at community meetings, while specialists averaged only somewhat more (see also Frank, Brandl, and Watkins 1997: 721, 724). Despite the best management intentions to keep officers in their permanent beat assignments, officers seem to have difficulty remaining in their assigned beats for extended periods (Parks, Mastrofski, Reiss *et al.* 1998: 2–18). Finally, community policing specialists appear inclined to spend more of their time with citizens who are more respectable and less likely to present them with elevated emotions (Parks *et al.* 1999).
 3. Officers' attitudes toward developing partnerships with the community had no significant bearing on the inclination to use verbal or physical force with suspects in the two departments studied. The effects of training and community policing specialist assignment did not show consistent effects in the two departments.
 4. However, research on Indianapolis and St. Petersburg does suggest that police–citizen partnerships did have the desired effects on levels of perceived safety, regardless of the degree of structured disadvantage in the neighborhood, but modest differences did remain across socioeconomic categories at the individual level (Reisig and Parks 2004).

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